

# Walter Celestine



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1:47:20

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Alabama-Coushatta Tribe of Texas, Christians, Civilian Conservation Corps, COVID-19, Culture, Education, Employment, Family dynamics, History, Indian reservations, Indigenous, Koasati, Language, Lyon College, Native American religions, Native Americans, Nature, Nondenominational, Racism, TX - Houston, TX - Livingston

## SPEAKERS

Tiffany Puett, Walter Celestine

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Tiffany Puett 00:02

It's October 29th, 2020. This is Tiffany Puett. I am interviewing Walter Celestine for the Religions Texas oral history project.



Walter Celestine 00:23

[Koasati speech]



Walter Celestine 00:46

Okay, I want to talk to y'all about me. I am from the Alabama-Coushatta reservation in Livingston, Texas. I am a Coushatta, and I speak both Alabama and Coushatta language fluently. And I want to talk to y'all about when I was a young kid. Basically, I played in the woods with my cousins sometimes. And playing in the woods for us at the time on the reservation was to find something to eat, because we knew we didn't have any food at home. We didn't have electricity, running water, or anything. We had to depend on what was out there. So we learned to eat different things in different seasons. And so that was our play time until I went to school.



Walter Celestine 02:05

And at that time, I didn't know English at all. I spoke my language the whole time. And I didn't even know that there were different tribes within the reservation. I only had little trails that went to my cousin's house. We didn't even have a road that came to our house. It had a trail that went up to where we lived at when I was a young man. The CCC camps had made our houses. The CCC is a Civilian Conservation Corps camp, CCC. That's back when they had a lot of people coming in and building houses, so they brought their lumber way out in the middle of the woods and made our houses. My house was sitting on top of a hill, so that's how we lived.

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**Walter Celestine 03:15**

When we needed water, we went to the spring. We had underground water that came out that was real cold. And we would get the water from there or even bathing. There was a stream that went down and we bathed in the stream. Even in the wintertime, we bathed. Basically, my mom overheard some of the non-Indians say, "Those stinking Indians" and she took it literally, so she made sure we bathed every day, even in the wintertime when it was freezing cold. I remember bathing in the stream, and when I put my clothes on, it would be a tingling, warm feeling. I don't know if anybody had ever jumped into the cold water and then put your clothes back on. You can feel the warmth when you put the clothes on. So that's how it started.

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**Walter Celestine 04:12**

When the time came that I'm supposed to go to school, I really walked up to my mom's house and told them it was time for me to go to school. I overheard what they were saying, but I didn't understand what school was because that was in English. And so my mom explained it to me that I had to go and learn things with other kids. We had a lady named Miss Baxley, who was our kindergarten teacher. And so they would pick us up in a station wagon. It was about a quarter of a mile down where there was a dirt road. So they picked us up at the dirt road, and my mom always walked me to the dirt road. And I would get in that station wagon, and sometimes I cried and had a big fit because I didn't want to go to school.

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**Walter Celestine 05:19**

One day, they always - one day I jumped out of that school station wagon. They always put me in the front seat by the driver because they didn't want me to run away or anything. So we were going up the hill, and I always saw them push that little black button down. And one day I pulled that little black button up, I pulled the handle, and it opened, so I jumped out and ran. The lady, the station wagon driver, got out of her car and tried to chase me, and I went into the woods on the right hand side. And then when she went into the woods, I came back around to the other side. She couldn't find me, so she finally got back in the station wagon and left with the other kids to go to kindergarten.

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**Walter Celestine 06:21**

Well, she had to come back and tell my parents, or somebody came back and told my parents. And at that time, my dad was still there in the house, and he was a good tracker, and I knew that, even when I was a little kid, I knew that. So I climbed up these little trees, and I jumped from one little tree to the other, so I wouldn't have any footprints on the bottom. And I went around the big pine tree, and I was hiding behind it. And sure enough, here comes my dad. He said, "Well, he came back across the road here, and he came this way. And right here," he said, "his track stops. I'm gonna circle around and see if I can find any of his tracks going any which way." So he went around in a circle, and of course, I was hiding behind a big pine tree and hiding and trying to hide from him.

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Walter Celestine 07:25

But while I was going around the tree where I saw my father circling, my mom saw me. And they were both talking in the language, of course. They said, "I heard there was a big lion that ate little kids, I guess it ate Tom," because they called me Tom. "I guess we better go home." And boy, when I heard that, I saw all sorts of wild animals around me, so I jumped out of there, and that's the first time my dad ever spanked me. My mom always disciplined me. She'd spank me or whatever, but she always sat me down too and told me what I did wrong. To this day, I mean, when my kids were around, I punished them. I told them what they did wrong. I didn't want to be like a friend, because I'm the parent. They should know right and wrong. In our culture, we want them to know right and wrong because they are a part of us.

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Walter Celestine 08:51

I'm a Coushatta, and I'm from the Panther Clan. We pride ourselves in our clans. Clans are different. We have clans and even in different tribes, they have the same clan. If they are, let's say, they're Creek Indian, Muskogee Creek Indian, and they're from the Panther Clan, then they are our relatives. They're our brothers and sisters. Way back in the old times, it's said that when an enemy attacked our villages, sometimes our non-combatants had to scatter, and the men had to stay and fight. And sometimes to the bitter end where the enemy might have overtook them and wiped them out. But the families went in so many different directions to other villages, and they couldn't come back because all the men had died in battle. So they had to stay in that village. But they had to remember what clan they were from because that might have been our relatives in different places. So that's how our clans came about.

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Walter Celestine 10:21

Now the clans, in the Alabama-Coushatta, we had twelve clans. And when I talk about clans, they'd come from your mother. My mother is from Panther Clan so therefore, I'm Panther Clan. It's a matriarchal system. When the chiefs are elected, at one time, they were chosen by the women of the village because the women in the village saw who always took care of the elders that didn't have relatives or something. They would bring them food. And so somebody that was kind to the tribe as a whole, they would choose them to be a chief. And so that's how it came about, because there's two chiefs. One is the big chief and one is the little chief. And to this day, we still have those.

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Walter Celestine 11:29

And now, the tribe elects who the chief is going to be. And sometimes it was hereditary, sometimes the chief's son became the chief when he passed away. But a woman could not be a chief because we had division of what men and women could do. But at the same time, in the old times, they would - if a man wanted to marry a woman, the man's aunt and the woman's or the girl's aunt would all get together, and they would talk about why, what this man had to offer. If he was a good hunter, he would tell them, "I'm a good hunter, and I'll be able to take care of the girl that I want to marry," and so forth.

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Walter Celestine 12:44

W Walter Celestine 12:44

And in the old times we had green corn ceremonies. Green corn ceremonies was to harvest the corn. And at that time, people got married or even got divorced, but it was very rare that they got divorced. But we still had that system. The difference between now and then is that when a child was born from the parents, the aunts or the uncles took care of them, and they taught them what they needed to learn. If it was a boy, then the mother's side of the family, the men would teach them how to hunt. Or if it was a little girl, then the woman's side of the family would teach the girl the tools that they had to be a woman, because things were divided.

W Walter Celestine 13:54

And a lot of times I see the people - non-Indians always laugh at us about - and they always measure. We don't measure. They say, "And the woman was always six steps behind the man," or something like that, like the men were superior to them. No, we weren't. The reason we were always in front of a woman was to defend them, to defend the women or the children, so a warrior had to always be up front to make sure that an enemy that might attack them, he would have to defend them. That's why they were always behind him. If there were more men than that, if there were two men, then there would be one in the front and one in the back in case they attack from the rear, they would have somebody behind them, but always protecting the family. Those things sometimes get misinterpreted. Things like that, there's always a reason why we did that.

W Walter Celestine 15:28

Before I lived in those CCC camp-built houses, they had little log cabins, maybe four or five little log cabins. One for sleeping in, one for cooking, and some for storage, and they had dirt floors. I remember in the back of my house, way back in the back my house on the reservation, there used to be a little log cabin that was still there, and I used to go see it. When I went hunting, I would go by it even though my parents told me not to go there, I did anyway. I was curious.

W Walter Celestine 16:19

So from there, I went to first grade. They allowed us to speak our language in first grade, but then when we got to second grade, they told us we couldn't speak our language. So we had to speak English. If we spoke our language to each other, they would punish us. They'd paddle us. I had a lot of paddlings, because I ended up at the principal's office because I spoke my language. But my grandmother told me, "When you talk to your own people, you don't speak English to them." We call it "Wachina." [Koasati speech]. That's what she used to say, "Don't speak to your own people in English." I didn't. So I got in trouble most of the time, but I got used to it. I got used to getting paddled.

T Tiffany Puett 17:20

Was the school on the reservation, or it was off?

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Walter Celestine 17:24

No, it was in a public school. We went to a public school. At one time there was a school - that was before my time, but there was a school that was created by the missionaries that taught the Indian kids. They learned how to do dressmaking and all that. The boys knew how to do carpentry work, and they said that was schooling, going to school. But we went to a public school. But after a while, things changed, and they stopped punishing us for speaking our language. We learned English, we had to, we're in the United States here. But at the time in my reservation, I didn't know we were ninety miles from Houston. We didn't know anything about non-Indians, White people or Black people or Hispanic people, we just knew our people.

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Walter Celestine 18:42

And of course, the Alabama, they speak a little bit different language than the Coushattas. Seems like the Alabama would speak more like the Choctaws, and we speak more like the Muskogee Creeks, but some of the words are the same. Different dialects, but again, dialects. There are three different villages that belong to us or are related to us. There's Alabama-Quassarte in Oklahoma, in Wetumka, Oklahoma. And it's spelled with a "Q", but it was spelled phonetically I imagine. Alabama-Quassarte and then Coushatta in Elton, Louisiana, and then of course, the Alabama-Coushatta in Livingston, Texas. So there's three different villages. Recently, we all got together and had a meeting, consortium meeting, where we discussed different things about our people. And I really enjoyed that meeting with the three different villages of our people.

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Walter Celestine 20:13

Anyway, as I grew up, I wanted to go to college, but I didn't know how. My mom wanted me to get an education, so she would literally push me to make good grades. If I made a C or below, I'd be in trouble with her. She only had a sixth grade education. And my grandmother on my daddy's side, she went to first grade, and she said that the teacher was so mean to the little kids. She was twelve years old. She was a lot older than some of the little kids. So she kind of beat up the teacher and never went back. That's what she said. But I couldn't believe it when my grandmother always - when we went to the stores, she would tell us, "I want this meat or that." We'd go to the butcher shop at Brookshire Brothers. Back in old days, they would butcher and put the meat out, and they would look at it, and she would choose which meat she wanted. She would always tell us to tell them that she wanted that one or that one and never spoke English. Of course, she dropped out of first grade.

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Walter Celestine 21:53

Somehow or another she learned how to read and write. Her A's were like in the newspaper, you know that little curved A instead of the A that we produce now. But she learned to read and write. Of course, I think she asked us questions. When I was a little kid, she use to put me on her lap and say, "What did you learn from school?" And I would really - I wanted to show my grandmother how much I knew, so I would say "A, A, Apple." And I had that little book, and I

would read to her. And apparently she was learning from us, and I didn't even know it. But that was incredible for my grandmother to learn how to read and write and all that, and she never went to school.

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Walter Celestine 22:51

Anyway, as I grew up, like I said, my mom wanted me to get an education, but my grandparents wanted me to learn the traditional ways. So they told - both my grandmothers - and sometimes my grandmothers would invite other elders to come over and teach me different things that they knew. And I didn't know, I was just a little kid. I just learned because they were teaching me things. And so I learned some of the herbal medicines and spiritual medicine, stuff like that. What they do, orally, is they teach you. They don't ever - we don't have a written language, so they say it over and over. They show you the different plants out in the woods, and they point at it and you kind of tell them what it's for, and stuff like that. But they tell you over and over.

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Walter Celestine 24:09

So they begin, they tell you the history from the beginning. And they refuse that we ever came from the ice bridge. People in history, they always talk about the ice bridge where we came across from Asia. My grandmother said, "No, we came from from the south." That we never went over the land bridge. I'm thinking, people always talk about how they came from Africa and went across and it spread all over the world, but when I think about it, the Chinese have more documentation than recorded from Africa. The Chinese has days dating way back before that, so it's interesting to me. The Creator God created the earth, and he put people all in different places. I'm sure some of us actually came from Asia. I mean, the Inuits, I guess they don't want to be called Eskimo, but they have relatives on the Russian side and they visit back and forth.

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Walter Celestine 25:49

I learned a lot of different tribes' histories. The Hopi Indians, they say they came from the south also and refuse to acknowledge that they came from the land bridge, the ice bridge. But again, there are certain - the archaeologists are learning that there were some things that were dated way before that ice bridge was there. So again, one thing, archaeologists, they keep digging and digging, they're gonna find out someday that there were human beings on this earth that predated the ice bridge, which I think Texas A&M did find a discovery and learned about the native people that predated the ice bridge. I'm always searching for that part because we, with our oral history, I'm gonna stick with we came from the south, meaning South America.

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Walter Celestine 27:13

We went up to Central America, and we went east because when we do our medicines, we do our medicines early in the morning when the sun's first coming up. That's the beginning of the day, and that's the most powerful time. And the Hopi does the same thing. When the katsina's

come out, they come out just when that beam of light comes out from the east. They come out and come through the village. They have katsinas that give gifts to the kids and all that, they call it. They have home dance and all that.

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#### Walter Celestine 28:01

And the reason I know about the Hopi, I was adopted by a Hopi lady, and I got to see all that, most of their ceremonies, so I'm familiar with them. Sometimes other tribes, tribal people, adopt you as their son or daughter, and you're their relative for life. We do too. We adopt people, and they're our relative for life. So we help each other out. In the old times, we had in our villages, if some child went wrong or did something wrong, the people in the village would get after them. They said, "Don't do that, that's wrong." They used to tell me not to do this or not to do that and it was wrong, because we wanted to make sure that people didn't see us as bad people, I guess. We wanted to make sure that our people are known to be good people. Of course if we got attacked, we had to fight, but we always treated each other nice.

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#### Walter Celestine 29:37

And now, when something happens and the teacher gets after the children, the parents go up to the schools and they get after the teachers. "You're not teaching them," or whatever. The responsibility is the parent, not the teacher. The teachers are there to teach them. You don't know what happens in school. I had the same thing. I signed a statement saying they could have corporal punishment for my kids. Even though they had the written statement from me, they never did do the corporal punishment. They would always call me and say, "Oh, my son got in a fight." I told my son not to fight, so he didn't fight. But the more he didn't fight back, the other kids would pick on him. And I have twins, by the way, Austin and Autumn.

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#### Walter Celestine 30:56

My daughter Autumn told my mother, "Austin won't fight back, so these kids are picking on him, and they're always making him cry." My mom asked Austin and he said, "That's what they do." And [she] said, "Well, if they hit you, you tell them, 'Next time you hit me, I'm gonna hit you back.'" She said, "If they hit you, you hit him back, you hit them back." So one day, I got a call from the principal and said that Austin was at the principal's office, and he got in a fight. I went to the school and Austin was sitting there when he saw me, and I said, "Austin, I thought I told you not to fight." He said, "Aapo", which means grandmother, he says, "Grandmother told me to hit 'em back if they hit me the second time, so I did." The principal said, "Yes, he got in a fight." I said, "I can't do anything about it, I got overruled by my mother." But after that, nobody picked on him. He had to defend himself, and I didn't realize that. I just told him not to fight. So you learn things as you go along also.

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#### Walter Celestine 32:25

Anyway, my mother wanted me to go to college, so she told our Presbyterian minister. His name was Byron Price, and he had five kids, and he was sending out letters for acceptance for college for his kids. And at the same time, my mother had asked them if they could help me out

in going to college. And so he helped me. Everyday after school, I'd get off at his house, and we would write for scholarships and acceptance to colleges. And I ended up in what is now called Lyon College, but at the time it was called Arkansas College when I went to school. And I choose that school because I like fishing, and the White River that went through Batesville, Arkansas had trout, and I wanted to go trout fishing, so that's why I choose that college [laughs]. But it turned out to be a really, very good school, and I learned a lot.

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Walter Celestine 34:05

I'm still learning, even today. I learn a lot of things, mostly archaeology. I work with my cousin over here in the Historical Preservation Office. And through the National Historical Preservation Act, we have to go to federal facilities if they had unearthed Native American remains and funerary objects, we have to take it back and rebury them, so I tagged along. I took administrative leave from my job and went with them to learn about archaeology, and they have to do all the background research and everything. And I read about it and learn, but at the same time, as a history major, I learned that sometimes when people write history about Native Americans, sometimes they misinterpret what Native people are saying. Because in our Native mind, we have a different mindset than non-Natives trying to understand what we're saying. And I found out some of the referenced history is not true.

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Walter Celestine 35:39

I'll give you an example. I was on on a panel, and they had all these different professors that came in and asked questions, or we would tell them different histories, oral history, and they would ask us questions. So we had a discussion about Peach Tree Village. And this is an old Alabama village, here in Texas. One of the professors said - of course he had researched everything before he came over to ask us questions - he said, "Well, Peach Tree Village was a Pvkánv Creek village." I said, "No, that's an Alabama village." It's documented, and it's referenced and I said, "Well, who wrote about it being a Pvkánv Creek village?" He said, "Well, it's documented by Dr. so-and-so." I said, "Is Dr. so-and-so Alabama or Coushatta?" He said, "No, he's not Alabama or Coushatta." I said, "Well, how does he know?"

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Walter Celestine 37:13

He was referring to a group of Pvkánv. Pvkánv means "peach" in Creek, so Pvkánv Creek Village, that was a village that was in Cold Springs. We're in Livingston, Texas in the same place, Polk County, but it's on the other side of the man-made Livingston Lake. Pvkánv Creeks live up north of us, northwest of us, around Cold Springs. Well, it might be Cold Springs. Anyway, they were talking about that group, but when they found out that the Creeks were removed to Oklahoma, they went back up to Oklahoma to be with their relatives, so they're no longer there.

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Walter Celestine 38:19

Anyway, our religion, it was so close or parallel with the Christian religion that we accepted it pretty fast. And the story is we originally came from Georgia, Alabama, and southern



Tennessee. The Coushatta fought de Soto in 1540 in Tennessee, on Tennessee River, we had an island. We Coushatta lived on an island, and on either side of the island, we had corn crops. De Soto couldn't defeat us. They couldn't penetrate our fenced in or stockade on the island, so they destroyed our corn crops and started going down south. And nowadays, when the colony started forming, we started moving east because we would rather trade with the French. And so, we went down to Mobile and then we moved over to around Montgomery, Fort Toulouse, where the Alabama River and the Coosa and the Tallapoosa forks.

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Walter Celestine 39:54

That's where the Alabamas were. The Alabamas were great traders, so they traded, and even some of the Creek that were up in the different villages would bring they're wear down to the Alabamas, so they could trade with the French, because they got better trade than the rest of us. They were peace towns, and again, the Alabamas and the Coushattas, we were part of the Creek Confederacy, where we had red towns and white towns. Red towns were warrior towns. They were like generals. When an enemy attacked, they got together, and they would form an army to go attack the enemy that attacked us. It was the red towns that took care of that business. But if it was a peaceful thing, the white town would get together, and they would tell us what we need to save for famine times and the communal crops that we had and different things that pertain to a peaceful way of settling things. But if an enemy attacked and it was the red town, that would be the head of what to do, to go into battle or whatever. So those were two distinctly different villages, red towns and white towns. Again, today we don't have those towns, we don't consider it red towns or white towns.

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Walter Celestine 41:51

So we kept going back west and ended up in Texas, but to get into Texas, the Koasati - there were Alabamas and Koasatis that were living in Louisiana, and of course, Texas was a Mexican territory. Some young Alabama warriors killed the non-Indians. They had a dispute with some non-Indians, and they killed the non-Indians, so the government said that if they didn't turn in the young people that killed the non-Indians, they would wipe out the whole village. So they sent four of their warriors. Two of them got hung, and two of them were imprisoned.

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Walter Celestine 42:58

And then later on the Koasati village that were on the Louisiana side, the chief's brother got killed by a non-Indian. So the young warriors went out and killed the non-Indian in retaliation. So the government sent a messenger saying, "If you don't turn in your warrior that killed a non-Indian, we will wipe out your village." The Coushattas, they picked up their village and went across the Sabine River into Mexican territory, and that's how we ended up in Texas. And then the Alabamas followed in, and this is why we, the Alabamas and Coushattas, we were always - in a way, we were always together, the Alabamas and Coushattas. We kind of traveled together, moved from Georgia, Alabama, and all the way to here. So from the beginning, we moved from South America to Central America to east to Georgia then we moved back west. There's a lot of things in between that, but it would take hours to talk about. Anyway, those are things that I remember.

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**Walter Celestine 44:48**

I want to talk to you about what my grandmother said. My grandmother on my daddy's side, she taught me a lot of things. My relatives created the First Indian Baptist Church. At one time they were going from - once we learned about Christianity, we would have meetings from one relative's house and then the next relative's house and finally, they decided to build a church. They would buy lumber. Any time they had spare money, they would buy lumber, and they built the First Indian Baptist Church. My relatives, including my dad, they helped build that church, which is now off the reservation, because W.T. Carter got my relatives from Elton, Louisiana to come down and work for them in the lumber company.

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**Walter Celestine 46:05**

They were living on company land, and W.T. Carter gave them the land around the church. We had built houses on company land, and they allowed us to live on it 'til nobody used it, then they would take it back as company land. So my relatives lived off the reservation. They were too proud to live on the reservation. Besides, the Alabamas had 1,200 acres. They put the Coushattas in there later on. They put us in their 1,200 acre land. Then Chief Sun-Kee went up to Washington DC and asked for land because there wasn't enough land there for the two tribes, so the federal government gave us another 3,000-something acres to make it 4,000-something acres. So 1,200 belongs to the Alabama tribe, and the rest of it belongs to the Alabama-Coushatta tribe. That's how our reservation formed.

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**Walter Celestine 47:37**

When I went to college the first time, my parents were actually very poor, and my grandparents. We all grew crops, and sometimes the food that we stored didn't last in the wintertime. We were really raring for spring to come because we wanted to grow things and be able to eat again. We grew a lot of vegetables, and then we would jar them for the wintertime. Of course, we had blackberries, muscadine, mayhaw, different things that we could gather in different seasons, huckleberry. Anyway, I learned the traditional ways with my grandparents. My mom wanted me to get an education, like I said. So at the end I was wondering, "What am I supposed to do? Do I go the traditional way? Or do I need to get an education, go to college, and all that?"

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**Walter Celestine 49:05**

I was wondering about that, and so I asked my grandmother. I said, "You taught me everything that I'm supposed to know about our traditional ways. My mom wants me to go to college. What do you think?" My grandmother sat there for a while, and she said, "You need to be the best in both worlds." She said, "In our Indian world, you know everything because I taught you what you need to learn in our way. You need to learn the non-Indian way. Get an education in non-Indian way, because you have to live in it." And she said, "When you get educated, you need to defend us." So that's why I went to school.

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**Walter Celestine 50:08**

And I came back, and she said, "I see a lot of our people drop out of college. They go to college, and they drop out." And she said, "[Koasati speech]." So she said, "I want to tell you something. Whatever you do, don't ever give up." So I went ahead and I finished college. Of course, I barely made it because I was making good grades until I joined a fraternity [laughs]. Then my grades kind of went down a little bit, but I made it anyway. But I think about it now, but it's okay. I learned something. I had a good time in the fraternity, but I had too much of a good time, and my grades were kind of slipping there. But I made it.

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#### Walter Celestine 51:28

This job that I have, it's Alabama-Coushatta Employment and Training. I was working for an oil company making a lot of money, I guess. And of course, oil is up and down, so you don't ever know. You make big money and then get laid off, and you really hurt because unemployment is not as big as what you were getting. And sometimes I feel for these people when the oil goes down and they're suffering because they were making good money, and then they have to support their family. At the time I was working in the oil field, I was single, so I didn't have any problem.

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#### Walter Celestine 52:17

But anyway, I was born on the Alabama-Coushatta reservation, and when I married a non-Indian, I was kicked out of the reservation because you had to marry your own people or you had to marry a native person to be on that reservation, at the time. And I married my college sweetheart. We've been married for thirty-five years now. And I mean, I can still go back to the reservation and everybody knows me. And now we can actually go back to the reservation if we want to. At one time, the Alabamas and Coushattas and Alabama-Coushattas, we were all full bloods, but now we've been inter-marrying so much that we're getting watered down. I have great-nephews and nieces that are half. I got full bloods and halves and even quarters. I have about twenty great-great-nephews and nieces. That's a lot. And I have a little brother that's thirteen years younger than me, so he might make it great-great-great uncle one day. So we know each other as relatives, every relative that I have.

W

#### Walter Celestine 54:10

That was the one thing, orally again, my mother always tells me why you're related to so-and-so and so-and-so. Every day, early in the morning when we got up, she would sit there and tell me who's related to you and why, and that you need to know your relatives. So those are the oral histories that come about, that's told over and over and over until you have it in your head. So a lot of the things that we're supposed to learn in our traditional ways, it's all in our head. It's not written down. We're starting to write it down now, but I'm traditional, so my kids know it orally. We have stories from way back, from long ago, that we teach our kids. And inside that, it might be a kids' story, but inside there is a meaning of why the stories are told. I didn't get it when I was a little kid. But I think about it as an elder now, I think about "Oh, this is why they told us the stories. There was a story within that story that tells you how to act or how to behave and why." Even though it sounded like a kids' story, there was some meaning behind it, and I didn't realize it 'til I got older. And now I understand that.

T Tiffany Puett 56:07  
So your children didn't grow up living on the reservation that you grew up on.

W Walter Celestine 56:15  
They did.

T Tiffany Puett 56:16  
Oh, they did.

W Walter Celestine 56:17  
Well, part of the time they did. But my mom was the one that - I mean, we actually stayed at my mom's house. On weekends, we came back to my house over here in Houston. So they went to school at the same school I went to, Big Sandy High School in Dallardsville, Texas. So they stayed at the reservations, so their grandmother was the one that they had to listen to her because she's an elder. And believe it or not, to this day, the kids on the Alabama-Coushatta Reservation give a lot of respect to the elders. It doesn't have to be a relative.

W Walter Celestine 57:14  
I'll give you an example. I had a young lady, a little girl, I guess about eight years old, and I was walking towards the office. And she ran in front of me and opened the door for me just to walk in. And I thanked her. And I said, "So who's your parents?" And she told me, and I didn't know who they were. I said, "Who's your grandparents?" She told me, and I didn't know. I said, "Who's your great-grandparents?" She told me, I said, "Oh, okay." So I had to go all the way up to the great-grandparents to know who that little girl was. I knew I was getting old then. But I tell you what, some of the kids, I mean, every one of those kids, they will be very respectful to an elder. And we have a Christmas dinner, tribal Christmas dinner, and the kids will serve the elders. The elders will come in early, and they will serve them. The elders don't have to walk up and go get the food. They'll bring it to them at the table every year. They don't have to do it, but they do. And that's why I'm so proud of them. Excuse me. I'm proud of them, because they really respect the elders, and we want to keep keep it that way too, from generation to generation. We want them to get educated.

W Walter Celestine 59:00  
One thing again, as educated as I get, I read the books where they talk about traditional Indians and progressive Indians. Traditional Indians, when they show pictures of the traditional Indians, they're poor, because they don't have all the luxuries of non-Indians. And then they have progressive Indians, and they're all wearing Armani suits and very successful in the non-Indian world. And when I talk to these kids, I'll tell them learn your traditions and customs and go out

and into the non-Indian world and learn about them, and survive in their culture, but you already know what your culture is and your traditions are, because we can be both. We can be traditional and progressive at the same time. You don't have to be one or the other. I don't want them to be split. I always tell them, "In the books, you learn, they say 'traditional Indian,' and you see this poor Indian man with raggedy clothes. And then you see these progressives where they have those big suits and ties and fancy cars or whatever."

W

Walter Celestine 1:00:37

I'm satisfied with my life. I mean, I'm not wealthy, but I am wealthy because I have a lot of friends from different countries. I learn a lot about their history. I used to work with Vietnamese, and I started to learn how to speak Vietnamese by the time I quit working with them. But anyway, going back to employment and training, I had a \$10,000 cut to come and take this as a director. I was making a lot of money here in Houston. But I like this program. What we do is any native person that's of a federally recognized tribe comes into our office, and we find them jobs. If they don't have the skills, we'll provide them to get certified like vocational training, electrician, they could be electricians, plumbers, welders. We get them certified, so they don't have to do minimum wage jobs. And they're taxpaying citizens. So I really like this program. I jumped in it. I've been working at this for thirty-two years now. The good thing is, sometimes these people will come in and say, "Thank you for getting me my job."

W

Walter Celestine 1:02:28

Some of them are long haul truck drivers, and they like the long hauls for some reason. I had Aleutian Indian lady that had gotten out of prison and wanted to be a long haul truck driver. The only thing is, she can go into Canada or Mexico with her truck. But we got her certified to be a long haul truck driver. She's been driving ever since. Every once in a while, she'll stop at one of our offices and thank us for giving her the job. That really satisfies my staff. They work hard in finding jobs or getting them certified to do certain things that they want to do. And it's a federal grant from the Department of Labor, and it's a competitive grant. And we've had it for a long time, because we are good at what we do. And my staff is really incredible. They'll bend over backwards to help them, and I'm tough. I give them at least two chances. And after that, I would rather just find them a job, because sometimes they don't want to work, but maybe their spouse is getting them to work.

W

Walter Celestine 1:04:12

So there's a lot of different things that go on. But after working thirty-two years, I pretty well know if they're willing to work or not. The single parents are the ones, they are very aggressive in trying to learn so they could have a decent job. We've had RNs, you start out sometimes with a LVN, even lower than that. Certified nurse's assistant, LVN, RN. If they want to go up, they need to come back, and we'll help them go up. We want them to be successful. We want them to be taxpaying citizens. We don't want them to stay in this welfare system. And this program is for all the fifty states. There's a grantee that is in every state of Texas, I mean, United States. They will have somebody that will assist them. And I really like this program, and that's why I took a cut in pay to come work here, but it's very rewarding to see native people get a decent wage and be able to support their family. So it's a good job.

T

Tiffany Puett 1:06:09

Can you say or talk a little bit about how your organization and the people that you work with have been affected by the pandemic?

W

Walter Celestine 1:06:20

Oh, yeah. Right now on our reservation, we have nineteen people that have COVID-19. One of my cousins just passed away with it and was buried Monday.

T

Tiffany Puett 1:06:39

Oh, I'm sorry.

W

Walter Celestine 1:06:42

And with - I don't remember - 1,150 or something like that in our tribal population - keeps going up. But so about 500 of them live on the reservation, half and half. Half off the reservation and working in Houston or other states, and half of them living on the reservation. And the reservation's having a bad time with this virus. Our young people are traveling a lot, and we're trying to tell them not to travel so much. They're used to going out here in Houston or Beaumont or Lufkin. And they bring it back, and their elderly parents probably get it and pass away or whatever. But we have curfews now. We don't want them to gather. And we're used to that. We hug each other, talk and everything, and when we see our relatives, we have to hug each other and stuff like that. And now we can't. That's the hard part. My sisters and I talk, but now we talk through the phone instead of visiting each other and talk with each other.

W

Walter Celestine 1:08:37

But surprisingly enough, sometimes when we're talking to each other in our language, the phone cuts off. We have to call back to each other. Sometimes I think Big Brother's trying to listen in, but they can't understand what we're saying [laughs]. But I'm so used to talking in my language and whatnot, but even my kids, when they were at my mom's house, my mom spoke to them in the language, so they understood it. They had to learn English so they can't speak too much anymore. I don't know why they lost it, but they understand it but they don't they don't speak it right now.

W

Walter Celestine 1:09:31

And my son's trying to learn it, so he calls me up. He's taking his master's degree in business administration. He wants to work at Wall Street, which is fine with me. Just money home. And my daughter is a sergeant in the Army National Guard. She went to Afghanistan for nine months and came back, so I was sweating it for a while, but she's back now. That was kind of

scary. I thought, "Army National Guard, oh she's gonna assist the people." She works in Oklahoma, so tornadoes and such. No, they sent her to Afghanistan [laughs]. I was kind of surprised. So she wants to be a commissioned officer. Now she's a noncommissioned officer going to school for to be a commissioned officer.

W

Walter Celestine 1:10:51

I guess one more thing I want to talk about is the churches. We have three churches, two of them on the reservation, one of them off. The First Indian Baptist Church, which was created by my dad and my uncles. My dad married my mom, and my dad's sister married my mom's brother. So we intermarried within the families. So sometimes that messes people up. Anyway, the First Indian Baptist Church, then they have Assembly of God Church, and the Presbyterian Church was created in 1886. I'm a Presbyterian because I was born on the reservation, so I went to the Presbyterian church.

W

Walter Celestine 1:11:54

The story about that is a missionary was coming through the Big Thicket area, and he got lost, and he was starving to death. And some of our people found him, and he was about to die of starvation, and they got him well, fed him and got him well, a little bit better, but they couldn't communicate because none of our people spoke English except for one person. So they took him to one of our tribal members that could speak a little bit of English, and that's how Christianity came about. And this is in - let's see - in the late 1800s. Before that, we still did our ceremonies and dances, which we still do, but it was parallel to what we believed in. We knew about a Creator, we just didn't know about, as Christians, Jesus Christ. But before that, we had similar teachings like the Christian Bible. And anyway, the missionary, once he got well, he was going to go to South America. On his way he got lost in the Big Thicket. And so we took him back to Beaumont, and he got on a boat and went to South America where he was supposed to do missionary work. But while he was at it, he told some of the people in the missionary that there were some Indians in the Big Thicket area that didn't know anything about Christianity. So they sent some Presbyterian missionaries to teach us about religion.

W

Walter Celestine 1:14:25

So we gave up our traditional dances and stuff to be Christians. And my family was the last one that gave up the traditional dances and stuff. We still did it in front of my grandmother's house. I was a kid then, and I remember doing dances and stuff. They built a big bonfire, and they would sing old songs and dance in front of my grandmother's house. And I remember because as a young little kid, I got to play with more cousins than I ever wanted to. So I enjoyed the old traditional dances and stuff. And some of the ones that were already Christians would sneak over to dance with us. I guess they just wanted to remember the dances and stuff. And we still have some of the traditional dances and ceremonies. We don't give up, but we kind of quit a lot of our traditional stuff because we got Christianized, but before then, before 1800s, nobody bothered with us about telling us about Christianity.

T

Tiffany Puett 1:15:58

Would you say that some of your traditional practices had been integrated into your church, some of these have been blended together?

W

Walter Celestine 1:16:10

Yeah, some of them are blended together. We used to have morning songs. Every morning we'd sing songs and pray to the Creator, thanking the Creator for this day. I still do. The Creator gives us a day every day. We pray to the Creator in our own way. We have songs too, morning songs. I don't know if some of the other ones do it anymore, but like you said, it integrated with - I mean, it's the same belief, except we didn't know things about Jesus Christ. The Creator - I mean, when we say Aba Mikko or God, or Aba Chokkooli, it means "the one that's above all." "Above all" is the meaning, and creating everything, and is still creating everything. We believe that our Mother Earth, all the living things on Mother Earth are still alive, even rocks. We believe that things are alive. If you're thinking in a non-Indian thinking, you see a rock and you pick it up and you throw it or whatever. You don't think about it. But to us, we think about how this rock is alive, even today.

W

Walter Celestine 1:18:15

I taught my kids a lot of things like that. And I also teach them how to pray with a pipe and tobacco, and the four directions to pray to the Creator that way. So we integrate prayers our way and the Christian way too. So we go back and forth. To me it doesn't matter. I know I'm Presbyterian, and my wife's a Methodist. To me, I'm not denominational now when I think about it. I don't disagree with anybody. I want peace and harmony. That's all I want. For the time when the chiefs are inaugurated, I'm their spiritual leader to inaugurate the new chiefs into their - a ceremony. We do a ceremony to put them in. So a man of peace, I guess, of peace. In that way - I'm from a red town. Remember what red towns are? I'm a peacemaker from a red town [laughs].

W

Walter Celestine 1:20:01

You don't talk about those things, because when people say, "Oh, I'm a great medicine man," and all that stuff, "I do healing and all that," that's not true. And a healer's thinking is God heals through you, not you healing people. We are just ordinary human beings. But the Creator is the one that heals through you. At one time, when there was an illness, a sickness that came, wherever that sickness came from, there was also a cure nearby. That's how we thought, and that's how it was.

W

Walter Celestine 1:21:12

So some of the elders got together one time, and I happened to be around them. And I was still in high school. I was around these elders, and they were discussing about the fires in South America. I don't know how they got the idea, because they didn't have television or anything. But they were talking about, "What's going to happen? They're burning all those forests out there in South America, and if something bad comes out of that fire, how are they gonna heal?"



Because whatever badness that comes out, there's also a healing plant somewhere out there that will heal, and they're burning it." And they had a big discussion about it, and I happened to be sitting there with them drinking coffee with them. And I always think about that.

W

Walter Celestine 1:22:32

These elders, they think about things in the future, and we also have philosophy - not philosophy, we have prophecies that came from way back and it says in one of the prophecies, it also says that when people are starting to look the same and be the same, Mother Earth will wipe us out. We human beings, were overpopulating this place, our Mother Earth, and we're supposed to be the one that takes care of Mother Earth, our native people, and we're not. We didn't prevail. And I think about that, because I look out this window here, I'm the office, and there's so much cement. Everything is cement. Where are the animals gonna live? On our reservation, we have a lot of animals, because we haven't cut down everything. And we don't want to cut down everything, but sometimes we have to build houses too. So here we're taking the space of some animal that could live there.

W

Walter Celestine 1:24:26

We're overpopulating, and we're gonna destroy ourselves. And that's what the prophecy was talking about, the people that were prophesizing. Some of the things that come true already. They told us someday that price of water, we would have to pay a big amount for water. And my mother was telling me this before, a long time ago. She was sitting there, and she said, "Yeah, my parents were telling me that we would be paying for water." I said, "Why should I pay for water? I'll just go to the creek and go get me some water." And now I'm drinking these bottled waters, because some of the waters aren't any good to drink. And she said, "I used to say that. I thought to myself about that, and I used to say that. Now I'm drinking water, and I have to buy bottled water." So there are other prophecies, too, that were told by our people, and sooner or later it's going to come true. And these are the things that, orally, we tell our kids what's gonna happen. I also told my kids that we failed as caretaker of Mother Earth. We tried, but we're not the majority population.

W

Walter Celestine 1:26:23

And one more thing I'm telling you, in our way, when they're four months old, we shave their hair off, girls or boys. We cut their hair off, and we give them names. I'll give you an example. My kids Austin and Autumn, Austin's name is [Name]. When he was four months old, I gave him that name. It means "little red bear." And someday, he will be "red bear." He won't be little anymore. And my daughter's name is [Name], "little basket," and the reason I called her "little basket" is because my mom was one of the best basket makers in the Alabama-Coushatta reservation, and she passed, away but someday my daughter is gonna learn how to make baskets from my sisters. So I gave her the name "little basket." We have English names, and we have our own - I call it real names.

W

Walter Celestine 1:27:44

So when you choose a name, I told my nephews, "Make sure you choose a good name." So

when one of the teachers at the school found out, she asked the little kids, "So what's your Indian name?" And they would tell her, "My name is this or that." And so it came to my one of my great-nephews, the same age as Austin, and he literally said, "I don't have one." And some of the other kids jumped in and said, "His name is [Name]. It means 'little grasshopper.'" He didn't like his name [laughs], so he was trying to tell the teacher that he didn't have an Indian name, but we do have an Indian name. And I got after his dad." Remember I told you, "Give him a good name, not something funny". And anyway, so we do have our own names. Is there anything you'd like to know?

T

Tiffany Puett 1:29:20

We've covered so much. This has been really great, and it's been really great hearing about your story, and you have so much knowledge that you've shared. Do you feel like there's anything else that you still want to share or more about this history that I know that you want to pass on through this interview, like other pieces that you think are important to talk about?

W

Walter Celestine 1:29:53

Oh, let's see. I'm going to tell you a story by this owl, and then you can think about it. There was an owl. At one time, the Creator, God the Creator would come down, and He told the owl to be like a judge. So He taught every time He came. He would teach the owl all the things he needs to learn to do judgment. So the wild animals, sometimes they would have disputes, and they would come in front of the owl and tell them about their dispute. And the teachings of the Creator, he would be able to do the judgment. "Well, you're wrong, and this is what needs to happen." And he would make a judgment. So the Creator would come in and teach him some more, but He came less and less. And the owl thought, "Well, I'm pretty wise now. I'm starting to be wiser than the Creator, because he's coming over and teaching me less and less, I must know a lot. And I think I know a lot."

W

Walter Celestine 1:31:58

So instead of listening to the teachings of the Creator, he started making his own judgment, and he made mistakes because he didn't follow what the Creator had called him. And so the animals were getting frustrated, because he didn't make the right judgment as he was taught by the Creator. So one day, the Creator came, and one of the animals, the wild animals that had been misjudged, came over and told the Creator. He said, "This is what happened, and the owl said this for his judgment, and it wasn't right." And so the Creator watched the owl make his judgment without him knowing, and he made the wrong judgment, because he was doing it according to what he thought, not what the Creator had taught him.

W

Walter Celestine 1:33:18

And so the Creator was angry at the owl. And He told him, "I have taught you how to do judgment, and yet, you didn't follow what I taught you. So from now on, you're gonna be a messenger of death, or something bad that's going to happen." So in our Indian way, when the owl hoots at night or something, especially a horned owl, it means he's bringing a message that

one of your relatives are gonna pass away, or sometimes some some bad things are gonna happen to your family. So the Creator told the owl, "From now on, you're gonna be a messenger of death or something bad that's gonna happen, and you're only gonna stay awake at night." That's why the owl always sleeps in the daytime and rooms at night. This is one of the stories that was told from generation to generation. And I always think about it, because in [inaudible], they always talk about the wise old owl [laughs] like Rice University [laughs].

T

Tiffany Puett 1:35:10

They don't know that story, I guess.

W

Walter Celestine 1:35:13

They don't know the story. I didn't want to tell them that story. But that's just one one story. There's lot of stories, but there's a meaning behind it. But when we hear a horned owl hooting or something, we know that something bad is gonna happen or a death in the family.

T

Tiffany Puett 1:35:45

Yeah, yeah. Well, you're such a treasure trove of knowledge. You have so much history and so many stories that I feel like - I mean, we've talked for a while now, but I feel like you probably have a lot more stories that you could tell. So do you feel like that we've covered - I think we've talked a whole lot. Do you feel like we've covered a lot of what you'd hope to talk about today?

W

Walter Celestine 1:36:15

Yes, I'm satisfied with some of the stories that I've told, and hopefully when I'm gone, this will still be here, and my relatives can see and hear what I have to say. I am grateful for that, because someday they will look like you, because we will be all mixed.

T

Tiffany Puett 1:36:55

Yeah, yeah. Well, and I can tell too, that it really does take a lot of intentional effort to keep the stories and keep the history and pass it down.

W

Walter Celestine 1:37:12

I see my nephews and nieces that are mixed now, and especially my brother. My little brother has a daughter, Angel, and she's got blonde-ish brown hair and White skin, and she's half. And you can't tell that she's Native. And my sister had a son, and he was in school, and he told them that he was Native, and nobody believed him. And he and this little Hispanic boy got in a fight because he said he was Native American, and the Hispanic boy said he wasn't. So he ended up in the principal's office, and my sister used to work at Kroger's. And she called me up

and said, "Would you go to the principal's office?" And back then I had braids, I had long hair. Well I still have long hair, but not enough. My hair is thinning, so I don't have the braids anymore. But I had my braids.

W

Walter Celestine 1:38:27

And so I walked into there, and that little boy, his eyes got about that big, and he looked at - I called him John-John back then. I still call him John-John. But I said, "John-John, what's wrong?" And that little Hispanic boy, his eyes got that big because he saw me as a Brown person with braids. And John-John told me, he said, "Tell him I'm Indian. He won't believe me." [laughs] So I still think about that. I mean, they might be looking like a Caucasian person, and they will be Indian. I was thinking about that.

W

Walter Celestine 1:39:20

And one more thing. This is one of the things. When I took my ACT [American College Testing] test, and in there, they told me to fill out this form. And they said, "If you're a minority, they're gonna give you extra points on this test." I don't know if it was SAT [Scholastic Assessment Test], ACT. I think I took both of them, but anyway. And I'm thinking, "Why should they lower the grade for me?" So I put Caucasian when I took my test, and I made enough grades to go to college, but to me, that was an insult. I'm as intelligent as anybody else, and for them to lower the grade for me, because I'm a minority, that pissed me off at one time. Everybody should be equal. If we can't pass the ACT or SAT test, and we can't make it, we shouldn't go to school. I mean, I knew I was intelligent enough to make it, and for them to lower that, to give me extra points so I could make it, that is not [a] very good thing to do. And then here, they have Orientals, they make it extra hard for them to pass. We need a straight down the line testing, not up or down, I think. Oh, by the way, my niece went to UT [University of Texas] in Austin. She's in Oklahoma now, but actually, she worked for OU [University of Oklahoma] [laughs], and she was still rooting for UT [laughs]. I mean, right.

W

Walter Celestine 1:41:59

I mean, I got one more, I guess. Education. We wanted our children to be educated, to run our government. We have our own government. So we had nine oil wells, and we had a certain percentage of the oil well money going to education at one time. At one time we had counted five people on our reservation that had degrees, and I was one of the ones. And we set aside money, and this is not federal money, or any governmental monies or anything, this is our money from the oil wells. And we started scholarship funds. And now, they can go up to 45,000 per semester for any kid that wants to go to college. And now we have to work for - I'm thinking about working on vocational schools also, because plumbers make as much money as anybody else. You're a master plumber, you could make seventy-five plus an hour, seventy-five bucks an hour. That's not bad. Not everybody is made for college. So I'm thinking our tribe needs to do some - change tactics here. I mean, we still have about thirty kids in college right now, but we also need to have a vocational one, I think.

W

Walter Celestine 1:43:59

But we're aggressively trying to make sure that our people are educated to run our government. And I used to tell the kids as a college graduate that if they go to school, I want to see that rope, that little rope. I was teasing them, but one of them came back, and he had a math engineering degree, and he had his little rope. He said, "Here's your little rope, Walter." And I was surprised. We have a dentist, and I think I told you this before, but I'm gonna tell it again. She went to Baylor with a 4.0 average in pre-med and got her dentistry. And we have a lot of very successful college students now making A's and stuff in college. Again, my son is doing his master's, and he's really studying hard and making A's in his master's, so I'm really proud of him, and I'm proud of all the tribal members that's going to school also.

W Walter Celestine 1:45:41

We want to be able to have medical doctors and everything. We need people like that in our reservation. We need to be able to defend ourselves. We might need some lawyers too. But anyway, the five of us started it, and now we still have the scholarships available for our people, which I'm very grateful of. When we defend ourselves, we'll defend ourselves by being educated, and at the same time, know our traditions and history. So that's my idea.

T Tiffany Puett 1:46:34

Right. Yeah, your story, it sounds like it's a lot of balancing between two worlds.

W Walter Celestine 1:46:43

Two worlds, yeah. Balancing.

T Tiffany Puett 1:46:45

Kind of walking, balancing, yeah.

W Walter Celestine 1:46:50

Yeah, it's working.

T Tiffany Puett 1:46:54

Yeah. Well, thank you so much for sharing all of this, Walter. This has been a really great interview, and I've really loved hearing all of this.

W Walter Celestine 1:47:06

Okay. I guess that's about it.



Tiffany Puett 1:47:13

I think so, yeah, but thank you so much.